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CENTRAL INTELLIGENCE AGENCY
National Foreign Assessment Center
15 September 1978

INTELLIGENCE MEMORANDUM

Cuba's Policy on Puerto Rico

Key Points

As long as Fidel Castro remains in power, the Cuban government will not deviate from its dogged support for Puerto Rico's independence. The Castro regime:

- Has not seized upon the Puerto Rican issue simply as a means of gaining a bargaining chip to exchange for US concessions on other matters; it is committed to Puerto Rican independence for historical, ideological, and practical reasons.
- Is acting on its own initiative, not Moscow's, although cooperation and coordination are close.
- May moderate its support activities for tactical reasons, but will not shift from its long-term policy goal of independence.
- Is confident that the current historical trend favors Puerto Rico's independence and that Cuba's efforts will eventually pay off.
- Is, in the meantime, extracting the utmost advantage from the popular appeal that the issue enjoys in the Third World.

It is a mistake to dismiss Cuban efforts on Puerto Rico's behalf as quixotic jousting with windmills. Castro believes his support for Puerto Rican independence:

This memorandum was prepared by the Cuba Analytic Center, Latin America Division, of the Office of Regional and Political Analysis. It was requested by the NSC Staffer for Latin America. Questions and comments may be addressed to

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- Can be exploited successfully at home.
- Can bolster Cuba's prestige worldwide.
- Can frustrate, embarrass, and reduce the influence of the US in international forums.
- Can act as a catalyst in Puerto Rico itself, crystalizing latent domestic feelings of nationalism and creating new pressures on Washington.

Castro believes US influence in Puerto Rico has already peaked and is now on the decline. He wants to help maintain that perceived slide as a guarantee against a recrudescence of the US political, economic, and social influence that was so pervasive in pre-revolutionary Cuba.

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Although Cuba and the US may eventually reach a more cooperative and mutually advantageous relationship, a genuinely amicable relationship is out of the question as long as Fidel Castro is in charge in Havana. Anti-imperialism has been and will continue to be a basic element of the Castro regime's foreign policy for both ideological and practical reasons; in Cuban eyes, anti-imperialism equates to anti-USism. Anti-imperialism is a philosophy so fundamental to Cuban revolutionary theory that it cannot be abandoned without considerable damage to the Castro regime's credibility both at home and abroad.

Cuba's policy toward Puerto Rico stems directly from this philosophy, as well as from Fidel Castro's personal negative bias regarding the historical relationship between the US and Puerto Rico. To summarize his own thinking on the subject, Castro likes to quote 19th century Cuban patriot Jose Marti that "Cuba and Puerto Rico are wings of the same bird" and he sees no justification for Puerto Rico not having achieved its independence as Cuba did.

It is sometimes difficult for US observers to understand the Cuban position because the Spanish-American War--sandwiched as it was between such momentous struggles as the Civil War and World War I--does not loom large in US history even though it terminated Spanish sovereignty over Cuba and Puerto Rico and placed them under US control. For Cubans, however, it is the major event in Cuban history with, perhaps, the exception of Castro's struggle against Batista. It thus follows that Cubans, especially the well educated, feel a strong sense of kinship toward Puerto Ricans regardless of the presence or absence of a reciprocal feeling. Castro's own commitment, for example, dates at least from the late 1940s, when, at Havana University, he was a member of the Federation of University Students' committee for Puerto Rican independence.

Because Castro's dedication to Puerto Rican independence originated in his formative years and is now firmly grounded in his revolutionary philosophy, he is not likely to be deterred from pursuing the Puerto Rican cause in return for US concessions in other areas. He does not view the Puerto Rico issue as a bargaining chip. He may change his tactics or moderate his rhetoric for tactical reasons, but, in our judgment, his goal will remain the same--independence for Puerto Rico.

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Castro moderated Cuban propaganda during the recent Panama Canal negotiations and the Senate ratification process, for example, not to accommodate the US but because he understood that powerful conservative forces in the US would use Cuban pressure as an excuse to kill the treaty; in Havana's view, the tactical change was justified because the treaty was a major step toward the realization of a key Cuban foreign policy goal--the reduction of the US presence in Latin America. Similarly, Castro could be expected to avoid any Cuban action--aggressive Cuban initiatives, for example, in the United Nations--that he believed might be prejudicial to the chances for a favorable outcome of a plebiscite for Puerto Rican independence. (He would have to be confident beforehand, however, that the plebiscite would be a significant step toward independence rather than toward statehood or continuation of commonwealth status.)

In early and mid-1975, when Havana was quietly signaling its readiness to improve Cuban-US ties, Castro had ample opportunity to demonstrate whatever flexibility he might have on the Puerto Rico issue. Instead, he risked a reversal of the thawing process by vigorously promoting an international conference on Puerto Rican independence in Havana in September of that year. Cuban intervention in Angola in late 1975 proved to be the rock on which prospective Cuban-US detente foundered, but the Angolan problem had not even surfaced at the time Castro was actively preparing for the Puerto Rico conference. In short, Castro placed greater importance on holding the conference than he did on continuing the warming trend in relations with the US. There has since been no indication that this order of priorities has been reversed.

In pressing the Puerto Rican issue, the Castro regime is acting on its own and not as an agent of the USSR. Cuban maneuvering in the UN appears to be carefully coordinated with Soviet and East European UN missions and enjoys their support, but the driving force behind it originates in Havana. Havana no doubt can be persuaded by Moscow to adopt tactical changes in how it promotes its initiatives in international forums, but the Castro regime would unquestionably resist strongly any Soviet attempts to modify Cuba's basic position. On this issue, the Cubans probably believe they have the Soviets over an ideological barrel.

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Havana maintains close ties with the Puerto Rican Socialist Party (formerly the Puerto Rican Pro-Independence Movement)--which has an office in Havana--and probably also provides it with at least financial support. Contacts are also maintained with the Puerto Rican Communist Party and the Puerto Rican Independence Party. There is little hard evidence, however, that the Cubans today are pushing the "armed struggle" line in Puerto Rico as they did in the 1960s. In fact, Castro, [REDACTED]

[REDACTED] admitted somewhat ruefully that Cuban-backed Puerto Rican terrorists had gotten out of hand. Current Cuban propaganda does not call for violent revolution, but neither does it reject it, and Cuban leaders presumably believe that the independence process cannot run its full course without considerable violence at some stage. Moreover, there is no reason to doubt that Havana would resurrect the "armed struggle" line, and even support it operationally, if the Cuban leadership became convinced that it was the policy option holding the greatest promise. For the present, however, Havana is depending primarily on political rather than paramilitary means to achieve its objectives.

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Puerto Rican independence is no doubt looked upon in Havana as a long-term problem whose solution is nowhere in sight. Nevertheless, the Cubans cannot help but be buoyed with the results of their efforts on the Puerto Rican issue this year in the UN's Committee of 24. Moreover, Havana is probably increasingly optimistic that it can engineer more of what it views as a defeat for the US because the make-up of the Committee makes it vulnerable to the type of pressure Cuba has been employing. What is probably most gratifying to Havana, however, is the appearance of signs that the independence issue is being increasingly politicized by the Puerto Ricans themselves.

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